



# Under the Radar

The all-volunteer U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary is the most important water safety force you've never heard of.

BY DAVE CARTY. PHOTOS BY KENTON ROWE

**ALWAYS READY** Montana Coast Guard Auxiliary volunteers Dave Hansen, Helena, and Jim Armstrong, Bozeman, head home after an afternoon on Canyon Ferry Reservoir. They and other auxiliary members check watercraft for safety gear, rescue stranded boaters, help FWP game wardens patrol lakes and rivers, and assist other agencies with wildfire and flood emergency response.

“This gives me a chance to get out and do some volunteer work,” says Jon Wells, of a U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary (CGAUX) “flotilla,” or local unit, he is helping establish in Billings. “I’m always looking for some way to do a little bit more.”

Wells’s attitude is typical of CGAUX volunteers around the state. They are willing to do the unheralded behind-the-scenes work that helps recreational boating in Montana remain as safe as possible.

Wait a second. Did we say *Coast Guard*? ►►



Yes, the term does seem odd in a state known more for prairies, wildlife, and mountain ranges than for boating. Yet Montana contains more shoreline in its various reservoirs and rivers—Fort Peck Reservoir alone has more than 1,500 miles—than the entire West Coast. In this mostly arid landscape, 750 miles from the nearest ocean, the Coast Guard’s all-volunteer civilian auxiliary is helping save lives and protect aquatic environments.

### Semper Paratus

Though the CGAUX is not itself a military organization, it is part of the U.S. Coast Guard “family.” The organization was founded in 1939 at the onset of World War II, when Congress authorized a Coast Guard “Reserve” to use civilian volunteers to promote safety on oceans and the nation’s navigable waters. Two years later, Congress changed the name to Coast Guard Auxiliary. When the United States entered the war, 50,000 auxiliary members joined the effort, guarding waterfronts, carrying out coastal picket patrols, and rescuing shipwreck survivors.

Today the auxiliary operates under the direct authority of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security by way of the Coast Guard. Its 32,000 national members, many of them retired Coast Guard employees, are divided into 16 districts. The 13th District includes Montana, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. Though embedded in a military organization, the Coast Guard Auxiliary’s primary mission is recreational boating safety. It conducts boating education classes, checks boats for safety equipment and invasive species, reports water pollution violations, rescues wayward boaters, and helps game wardens patrol lakes and rivers.

Though they volunteer, auxiliary members are officially federal employees who take their orders from, and issue reports to, the U.S. Coast Guard in Seattle. Their motto, *Semper Paratus*, means “Always Ready.”

### A warden’s right hand

Because both organizations are in the water

*Dave Carty of Bozeman is a frequent contributor to Montana Outdoors.*



**COAST GUARD-APPROVED** Though embedded in a military organization, the Coast Guard Auxiliary’s primary mission is recreational boating safety, which it achieves through education and on-the-water patrols. Above: Dave Hansen and Jim Armstrong patrol Canyon Ferry Reservoir in midsummer. Coxswains, who command a vessel, and crew members undergo extensive training and certification in order to represent the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary on the water. “Except for combat and direct law enforcement, we are authorized to do anything the rest of the Coast Guard does,” says Armstrong, a past auxiliary division commander.

safety business, the CGAUX’s mission dovetails with that of the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Enforcement Bureau. “They do a ton of important boating education,” says Dave Loewen, FWP game warden in Helena. “They generally ask us to come in to their classes and talk about rules and regulations, what you legally can and can’t do out on the water.”

The auxiliary in Montana comprises roughly 65 volunteers who serve in flotillas in Helena, Great Falls, and Kalispell, with detachments in Billings and Missoula. Despite those small numbers, FWP Enforcement officials say the contribution of auxiliary volunteers is enormous. “Their visual presence on the water is a great deterrent,” says Ron Jendro, the bureau’s Recreational Program manager. “The work they do frees up our wardens to concentrate on other water safety issues.”



In addition to boating safety, auxiliary members teach marine radio operation, distribute information and answer questions at boat shows, visit boat dealers to stock safety brochures, and inspect vessels to make sure owners have safety gear such as life jackets, bailers, and fire extinguishers.

The volunteers also conduct boat inspections each summer throughout Montana.

“The boating safety work those guys do is essential,” says Liz Lodman, who coordinates FWP’s Boat Education Program. “They are out there encouraging good watercraft skills and boating safety on rivers and lakes.” Lodman notes that 17 fatalities have occurred on Montana waters over the past five years. “We’re hoping that they can help us and other agencies bring those tragic numbers way down,” she says.

Although auxiliary volunteers see themselves primarily as educators and safety



**KNOT SO EASY** Below: Carl “Hutch” Hutchinson of Helena instructs a boater in knot-tying basics at an education session. Below left: Auxiliary patrols inspect a wide range of waterborne vessels, including sailboats and personal watercraft. Left: “We’re basically the recreational boating safety arm of the U.S. Coast Guard,” says Jim Armstrong, an auxiliary volunteer in Helena.



experts, many are trained to support search-and-rescue operations. They also give cautionary warnings to boaters who appear to be breaking the law. Though auxiliary volunteers have no enforcement responsibility, the navy-blue U.S. Coast

**“We’re hoping that the auxiliary can help us and other agencies bring those tragic numbers way down.”**

Guard uniforms they wear and professional way they conduct themselves lend authority to their presence. “For instance, if we notice someone who appears intoxicated getting into a boat from a dock, we’ll suggest to that person that it might not be a good idea to go out,” says Dave Hansen, division commander for Montana. “And we’ll suggest it again, if necessary, and strongly.

But if they jump in that boat and start heading out, we’ll call FWP or the sheriff.”

Often problems can be resolved simply by providing information. “If we see someone with a boat that’s improperly registered, we’ll let them know they could get ticketed,”

Hansen says. “But we also let them know where they can find the necessary information. In some cases, we can give them the forms they need right there so they can fill them out and mail them in.”

Open water can be a dangerous place for recreational boaters and CGAUX volunteers. “That’s why we train our people to operate vessels safely,” says Hansen. Though auxiliary members are free to use their own boats as they wish, they must be certified when in uniform and representing the auxiliary on the water. “If they’re going out on patrol as what we call a ‘crew member,’ then they have to have certain qual-

ifications, like how to administer first aid, operate the vessel, and tie ropes. After that, we can train them to the next level—‘coxswain’—which is someone who is actually in command of the vessel,” says Hansen.

To maintain a high level of competency, the CGAUX conducts field exams in which members are judged on how well they drive a boat, conduct a mock search pattern, handle the craft when towing another vessel, and answer safety and first aid questions.

For all their work and dedication, auxiliary members receive no financial compensation, only the satisfaction of assisting others. For Hansen and his fellow volunteers, that’s worth more than a paycheck. “I enjoy helping people,” he says, “and I think you’ll find that’s true of any other auxiliary member you talk to.”

*The Coast Guard Auxiliary is recruiting volunteers. Learn more at [join.cgaux.org/index.php](http://join.cgaux.org/index.php) or by calling Dave Hansen, division commander for Montana, at (406) 459-2957.*